

OBITUARY

William R. LaFleur (1936–2010)

Professor William R. LaFleur has not only performed profound research on Japanese spiritual history but also played a major role in the expansion of cultural intercourse between the West and Japan. What we at the Eastern Buddhist Society are most grateful for is that he devoted himself as a member of the editorial board of *The Eastern Buddhist* for twenty years from 1978 to 1998. We would like to express our deep gratitude for his cooperation as well as our condolences to those who were close to him.

It is beyond my ability to review all of his works and discuss their significance here. But at least I can say that he proved how Buddhism has had a deep influence on the formation of Japanese cultures and spirituality through abundant sources from literature and the arts.

In his early magnum opus, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan* (University of California Press, 1983), he referred to classics beginning with the *Nihon ryōiki* and showed the important role of Buddhism in the formation of Japanese spiritual life. His observation that Buddhism became a “karma of words” which nourished the Japanese psyche provided a fresh, accurate perspective that was different from ordinary “Nihon-gaku” or Japanology.

His insights into Japanese spirituality through medieval literature are conspicuous in the following articles that he contributed to *The Eastern Buddhist*: “Too Easy a Simplicity: Watson’s Ryōkan” (13–1, Views and Reviews, 1980), “Philosophy Worthy of the Name” (14–1, Reminiscences, 1981), “Paradigma Lost, Paradigma Regained: Groping for the Mind of Medieval Japan” (18–2, Views and Reviews, 1985), and “Poetry and Risk: Ideology’s Edge in Dōgen and Tamekane” (24–2, Review Article, 1991).

His perspectives were not limited to Zen Buddhists such as Ryōkan and Dōgen but ranged over Pure Land Buddhists, as well. He contributed a wonderful essay entitled “Dancing into Freedom: Rennyo and Religion” to *Rennyo and the Roots of Modern Japanese Buddhism* (Oxford University Press, ed. Mark L. Blum and Shin’ya Yasutomi, 2006) which was published in memory of the five hundredth memorial for Rennyo Shōnin with the support of Otani University’s Shin Buddhist Comprehensive Research Institute. I was most interested in the fact that he discusses an authentic form of faith

that is represented by Rennyo's attitude toward his fellow practitioners, which held them to be *dōbō* (friends or companions on the path), through a comparison to "the guru syndrome" often seen in cults, by making reference to the Aum Shinrikyō incident.

He maintained unflagging attention to contemporary matters in the light of Japanese medieval literature and Buddhism. Once he kindly presented me his *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan* (Princeton University Press, 1992). Here, he discusses the relationship between abortion in Japan and Buddhism in terms of *mizuko kuyō*, a Buddhist ritual directed to aborted children. This was not only a magnificent, unprecedented study on Japanese culture but also a unique approach to "bioethics" presently under discussion throughout the world, both East and West.

I am not acquainted with how he became interested in the study of Buddhism but it seems he was greatly influenced by Professor Joseph Mitsuo Kitagawa (1915–1992) at the University of Chicago. He once stated in a lecture in retrospect:

I was fortunate enough to have Kitagawa Sensei as my primary teacher and mentor. And what made my fortune especially good was the fact that, although my studies focused primarily on Buddhism, Professor Kitagawa was a Japanese Christian who had a deep respect for Buddhism. ("Concentration and Understanding" in *Buddhism and Christianity: American and Japanese Moralities*, p. 42. Los Angeles: Bukkyo University L.A. Extension, 2009.)

When I read Professor LaFleur's writings, I strongly feel his warm, sympathetic eyes toward Japanese religions and cultures preceding the scholar's cool, analytical eyes. He confessed in this lecture that he learned the mind of compassion, or "*omoiyari*" in Japanese, from his Japanese wife, Mariko. In various senses, he was an excellent person with *omoiyari*.

Yasutomi Shin'ya